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COSÌ

Louis Nowra

INTRODUCTION

The great Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, claimed that a society's degree of civilisation can be judged by entering its prisons. In *Così*, Louis Nowra might be suggesting the same about a society's mental institutions. Until late in the twentieth century, Australia, like other developed countries, locked people in institutions if they caused problems for themselves, their families or the community. Social misfits who committed crimes were sent to prison or to mental asylums, where they were treated with drugs, surgery or shock therapy. Louis Nowra's hilariously funny and deeply moving play is set in a mental asylum in 1971 (and is probably based on Mont Park asylum in Melbourne, where both of Nowra's elderly grandmothers had been patients, and where Nowra himself worked on a theatrical production in the 1970s). The play exposes the inadequacies and absurdities of the mental health system while demonstrating the power of 'art' to lift the human spirit.

SYNOPSIS

Lewis Riley, a shy university graduate, agrees to direct a play in an asylum because he needs the money (p.1). He is initially somewhat daunted by the cast, which includes a manic depressive, a pyromaniac, an obsessive-compulsive, a junkie, a dazed lithium addict and a morose, stuttering ex-lawyer. Even more alarming, the play, chosen by the manic depressive Roy, is Mozart's comic opera, *Così Fan Tutte*. Utterly undeterred by the fact that it's in

Italian and none of the patients can sing, Roy convinces the others that it can be done.

Rehearsals are hampered by the patients' psychotic episodes and petty squabbles, and Doug's pyromania almost causes the cancellation of the opera. Henry, the ex-lawyer, won't speak, while Cherry (a sexually frustrated, homicidal glutton) and Julie (a pretty drug addict) vie for Lewis' attention. The third female cast member, Ruth, is so obsessive that the opera almost grinds to a halt, and Zac, the catatonic pianist, insists on playing Wagner because he hates Mozart. Lewis' girlfriend Lucy and his friend Nick, who are organising a public rally against the Vietnam War, strongly disapprove of time being wasted on a bourgeois comic opera, and Lewis' confidence is undermined by Roy's constant complaints about him.

As rehearsals lurch from one crisis to another, Lucy admits she's having sex with Nick (p.71) and her relationship with Lewis ends. Despite the overwhelming difficulties, the patients develop a strong commitment to the opera and a somewhat chaotic performance takes place before an audience of supervising staff and semi-comatose inmates. In the eyes of the performers, however, it's a resounding success as they have each achieved something that none of them had believed possible.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War

The involvement of Australian military forces in Vietnam occurred against a background of concerns about the Cold War (the ongoing political conflict between Russia and America after the Second World War) and fears of Communist expansion into the western world. During the 1960s, Australia had supported America's 'containment' of Communism in Southeast Asia, and sent troops to Vietnam to honour our obligations under the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO).

The Australian troops sent to Vietnam were, at first, part of the 'regular' army. In 1964, however, a national military service scheme was introduced, involving conscription (compulsory army training) for 20-year-old males. Conscription was based on birth dates and involved full-time service for two years. When conscripts were sent to Vietnam, opposition to Australia's involvement increased dramatically and the anti-war movement suddenly grew from small demonstrations into huge rallies, with hundreds of ordinary Australians taking part.

The first Vietnam Moratorium (rally for a suspension of military involvement) in Australia was held on 8 and 9 May 1970, with over 200 000 people participating across Australia. In Melbourne, it was estimated that 100 000 people took part. These protests were important moments for many Australians who were torn between traditional family loyalties and new political principles (Skwirk Interactive Schooling 2009).

Mental health in Victoria

Yarra Bend Lunatic Asylum, in the mid 1800s, was the first Australian institution for individuals with mental illnesses. Inmates in early asylums were often there because their behaviour was seen to be a threat or disruption to society. For example, alcoholism and homelessness were issues which were not given proper attention; instead, people were often simply sent to asylums. Among symptoms believed to indicate insanity were "protracted sleeplessness", "persistent headache", and "great depression or exaltation of spirits without sufficient cause" (Coleborne 2008). With such general definitions of insanity as this, it is easy to see why the Victorian asylum system quickly became very full. By the late 1800s, approximately one in every four hundred Victorian citizens was classified as insane.

Psychiatry has had a long history of subjecting patients to bizarre, dramatic and often barbaric (uncivilised) procedures. Sometimes these were intended to restrain patients, but sometimes they were thought to cure specific conditions. In the 1930s, for example, insulin shock therapy was introduced and became an accepted treatment for depression and manic depression. At

the height of its popularity, it was administered widely to institutionalised patients.

In the 1940s electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) and frontal lobotomies were introduced. Lobotomies were a form of brain surgery used to pacify patients and are now regarded as barbaric. The use of Lithium salts (rediscovered in 1949 by Australian psychiatrist John Cade) was an attempt to control mania in chronically hospitalised patients. In the 1950s, antidepressant drugs arrived on the scene and were used with a range of other drugs for sedative or restraining purposes; stimulants were used to 'liven up' patients with depression.

Some people have argued (and Nowra might agree) that such psychiatric treatments act as a covert form of social control. Medication offers a relatively simplistic solution to a complex problem, and at the same time it hinders people from 'formulating an appropriate ... response to madness and mental distress' (Moncrieff 2002). It was not until the 1990s that asylums in Australia were closed, and the mentally ill were deinstitutionalised.

Music

Così Fan Tutte

Mozart and his librettist (writer of lyrics) Lorenzo Da Ponte take up the theme of fiancée-swapping, a notion which dates back to the thirteenth century (a famous version being Shakespeare's seventeenth century play, *Cymbeline*). Mozart's opera follows the tradition of Renaissance *commedia dell'arte* plots which question the fidelity of married women – an issue by which Mozart was troubled. The title, *Così Fan Tutte*, literally means 'thus do all' and implies all women, but is usually translated as 'women are like that'. The three male characters sing these words in Act Two, Scene Thirteen, in the finale, which culminates in the reconciliation of the lovers. Despite his glorious music, Mozart's audiences found the plot trivial (just as Lewis' friend Nick does). Nineteenth-century composer Richard Wagner (Zac's musical hero) found

Così Fan Tutte demeaning to women, whom he regarded as noble and, potentially, the moral saviours of men.

Despite such objections to the plot, the opera has endured and is popular with modern audiences. Roy believes that it echoes with the 'harmony of the spheres' (p.13). This is an idea which originated with the ancient Greek philosopher, Pythagoras, who believed that each of the planets was enclosed in a sphere, and these spheres ascended towards heaven like the rungs of a ladder. Each sphere emitted a sound which corresponded to notes in the musical scale, and thus brought order and harmony to the universe. Although we no longer believe in planetary spheres, the idea of music creating universal harmony remains.

Wagner

Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* (the most famous piece from his opera *Die Walküre* or *The Valkyrie*) is well known today because of its many references in popular culture, including the memorable helicopter assault scene in the film *Apocalypse Now*. Wagner's music exemplifies the intense passion of grand opera, with its powerful and rather melodramatic style, and is the antithesis of the more graceful, classical style of *Così Fan Tutte*. *Ride of the Valkyries* would be ridiculously inappropriate as the overture to *Così Fan Tutte*.

Twentieth-century musical references

The Electric Prunes (Zac's favourite musicians) were a phenomenon of the drug-fuelled 1970s; their talent was minimal and their fame was fleeting. Little Richard was a more enduring talent, performing in the 1950s and 60s with hits like 'Tutti Frutti' and 'Good Golly Miss Molly'. Little Richard was an African-American equivalent to Elvis Presley, and Doug's comparison of Little Richard's music with Mozart's is intended to be very amusing.

STRUCTURE, LANGUAGE & STYLE

Structure

Così is a two-act play which loosely follows a traditional narrative structure: exposition, development, complication, climax, resolution. In Act One, a sense of impending crisis is driven by the tensions between the characters, the impossibility of the task they've undertaken and the incompetence of the director. In Act Two, tensions escalate and the crises become more dramatic, while the patients' needs to perform the opera become the play's driving force. The performance itself ends on a high note of hilarity and hope, although Lewis' final address to *Così*'s audience reminds us that theatre is about creating illusions and that real life is more problematic.

The most notable structural feature is the 'play-within-a-play', which highlights the parallels between the characters and themes in Mozart's opera, and those in Nowra's play. Both opera and play revolve around issues of loyalty, fidelity and betrayal. The backdrop of war is also a significant feature of both texts: the Vietnam War in the 1970s (in *Così*) and the Albanian battle for independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1790 (in *Così Fan Tutte*). Wars also involve loyalties and betrayals, and their exemplification of chaos on a grand scale underscores the chaos in the lives of the characters in the opera and the play.

Language

One of the play's striking language features is the juxtaposition of the poetic language of 'grand opera' with the plain-speaking and often sexually explicit language of Nowra's characters. The coarseness of phrases like 'I need a fuck' (p.79) and 'she's a good root' (p.85) clearly recognises the sexual impulses beneath the elegant, poetic language of Mozart's opera, thus thematically linking the characters of the opera and the play. As Zac astutely observes, 'you have to wrap it all up in fancy language ... when it all comes down to ... the same thing' (p.79).

Nowra has often been criticised for not dealing with 'home-grown' issues. Yet *Così* includes many examples of Australian vernacular, which clearly identify it as part of a uniquely Australian culture, with expressions such as 'grungy' (p.5), 'shacked up' (p.6), 'sheilas' (p.6) and 'drongo' (p.8). (Interestingly, Mozart could have been similarly criticised. An Austrian composer, he chose Italian for his libretto because in 1790 it had more cultural credibility than German, his own native language.) Nowra's use of typically Australian language in his early 1990s play confidently affirmed our cultural credibility at a time when the culture of Europe was more highly venerated.

Style

Comic drama

Traditionally in comic drama, characters are placed in opposition to each other in an amusing conflict. In *Così*, the oppositions between 'sane' and 'insane' characters are the source of much of the play's ironic humour. However, Nowra invokes this opposition to blur the line between sanity and insanity.

Nowra has exploited some of the traditional elements of comedy, such as incongruity: in this case the absurdity of staging an opera in a mental asylum or the utter inappropriateness of Wagner played on a piano accordion. Nowra also mischievously overturns audience expectations and assumptions about, for example, sanity and insanity. While this causes amusement, there is a serious point to be grasped. Nowra's seemingly stereotyped characters initially fulfil audiences' expectations about madness; however, the patients eventually emerge more strongly as human beings than as 'lunatics'.

Black humour

This style of comedy finds its humour in joking about sensitive subjects and dark elements in human nature. In *Così* it is the patients themselves, with their amusing and often perceptive comments about their mental illnesses, who are the source of much of the play's black humour. Similarly, sexual humour

creates comedy by violating social conventions or taboos in comedic ways. Doug's frequent teasing of Cherry is an example.

Farce

As a play which involves stereotyped characters, physical humour, deliberate nonsense and the entanglement of the protagonist (leading character) in complex and highly improbable situations, *Così* contains the essential elements of farce. Lucy's question, 'are you sure this is not a French farce?' (p.71), makes this explicit as she adds to the humour by deconstructing the genre. Farce provokes laughter through caricatures of people in improbable or silly situations (Wheeler 2009). It is highly tolerant of immoral or criminal behaviour, and tends to depict human beings as vain, irrational and childish. The action moves at a frantic pace toward the climax – a happy ending where the initial problem is resolved. These farcical elements in *Così* are perhaps inevitable, given the play's setting and the challenges that the characters face. The ending, however, is not entirely 'happy' and there are unresolved tensions which linger uncomfortably. This 'unresolved' ending more accurately reflects real life and helps to strengthen the points Nowra wants to make about mental illness.

CHARACTERS & RELATIONSHIPS

Lewis

Lewis is constructed to represent the values that Nowra himself strongly sanctions; the play is, after all, partially autobiographical. As the protagonist, Lewis' point of view is privileged, and audiences are invited to sympathise and identify with him. We respond warmly to his shyness and insecurity, and his genuine interest in the patients is contrasted with Justin's self-importance. Although Lewis' involvement in the opera is initiated by his need for money, and at first he reacts '*uncomfortably*' to the situation (p.4), Lewis gradually develops a strong commitment to the patients and their outlandish project and, even though he recognises that 'it's madness', he '*knows he won't leave*'

(p.16). In this regard, he embodies a central theme of the play: loyalty. Yet, Lewis is not always loyal. This connects him thematically with Mozart's disloyal characters, and raises questions about whether Lewis is a hypocrite when he self-righteously condemns Lucy for betraying him even though he himself has 'passionately' kissed Julie (p.68). Despite this, his loyalty to the patients is the real test of his character. He demonstrates this loyalty unequivocally by not attending the moratorium because the patients 'need' him (p.69), and he refuses to 'let them down' (p.70).

Lewis' gentle and respectful interactions with the patients reveal his humility and compassion. His patience with Ruth exemplifies this. When she's at her most neurotically obsessive, Lewis reassures her: 'That's fine Ruth, I never doubted you ...' (p.38). Lewis is also able to see through the label of madness to the vulnerable human being underneath. When Roy is paralysed by stage fright, Lewis convinces him that he won't make a fool of himself, and affirms the importance of being 'noticed' (p.75). This might be seen as a philosophical comment about the need for recognition in our lives; it might also be interpreted as a condemnation of a society which prefers not to 'notice' people like Roy and instead locks them discreetly away in institutions.

The relationship between Lewis and the patients changes him, allowing him to recognise the importance of 'love and fidelity' (p.70). These are also the values that Nowra appears to consider important in human relationships – where 'love' is not simply the kind of romantic sentiment satirised in Mozart's opera, but a deeper and more enduring bond based on trust, respect and loyalty. These are key values in the play. The development of Lewis' character, signalled by his participation in the opera, highlights another thematic connection between Lewis and the patients: the transformative power of art (in this case music and theatre) which does eventually bring them all 'right out of their shells' (p.84).

Roy

Roy is the play's antagonist (an opposing force for the main character), needing to compete with and undermine Lewis in order to be the focus of

attention. He is a classic manic depressive who has been treated with electroconvulsive therapy. His re-enactment of ECT's grotesque effects is a grim example of black humour and it implicitly condemns such inhumane practices (pp.59–60). Roy in his mania initiates the play-within-a-play but also disrupts it. He is dominating, controlling and exasperating and, perhaps because of this, is able to convince a sceptical and unwilling cast and director to take on Mozart. Roy seems to embody Nowra's own ideas about the importance of theatre, saying that without the opera, which here represents theatre in general, 'the world wouldn't be the same. It would break, like a voice in despair shattering glass' (p.13). Roy's passion and determination finally win the others over and they begin to find order, meaning and purpose in the opera – and in their lives.

There is, however, a desperate edge to Roy's passion, born of a need to fabricate an identity he finds acceptable: one with a childhood spent sitting on a veranda listening to Mozart's music, and a beautiful mother who sang him lullabies (p.64). Roy's sad reality, though, is a childhood spent in an orphanage and being 'farmed out' to a series of foster parents (p.76). This has left Roy lonely, vulnerable and deeply insecure, and might be the source of his stage fright – a terrible fear of exposure and rejection, with everyone 'staring' at him (p.75). Roy's elation after the opera's success enables him to reconstruct a comforting fantasy world where illusion and medication make his life endurable. It is worth considering whether this is a philosophical comment from Nowra about human existence in a chaotic and ultimately meaningless universe.

Doug

Doug is the major source of complication to the play's narrative progression, as his pyromania threatens to destroy the venue and close down the rehearsals. Of all of the characters, he is perhaps the most classically 'mad', in the sense of being dangerous and uncontrollable. Nevertheless, he is witty and perceptive and has a strong sense of irony. Doug is a cynic who exposes pretensions and hypocrisy. His ironic response to Justin's rhetorical question

about where the world might be without social workers is, perceptively, that it would be 'in tip top condition' (p.7). He is also sharply accurate. His quietly perturbed question about Zac, 'how much lithium is the poor bugger on?' (p.11), is a clear condemnation of the harmful effects of intensive drug therapy.

Doug is also the source of most of the play's crude sexual humour and, as a representative of the traditional comic character – the 'all-licensed fool' – he is often able to state explicitly what others cannot. His question about whether Lewis, as director, gets to 'fuck the actresses' draws attention to power relationships that traditionally operate behind the scenes in patriarchal societies (p.5). Doug's symbolic connection with the motif of fire suggests both the destructive and the illuminating power of his cynicism.

Justin

Justin is a comic stereotype whose self-importance, condescension and hypocrisy are ironically amusing, but his more serious function is to highlight the problems of an institutional approach to mental illness. Justin's patronising comment that the patients are just 'normal people who have done extraordinary things' (p.5) is firmly contradicted by the grim reality of institutional life: closed wards and strong medications. Clearly, too, some inmates are dangerous, like Doug, or ill, like Henry and Roy. The irony of his comment that there'll be 'no carving knife against the throat' (p.5), in the light of Cherry's later flick-knife attack on Doug (p.34), highlights Justin's ignorance and ineptitude.

Justin's failure to recognise the contradictions inherent in his clichéd approach to mental illness is both a comic incongruity and a criticism of his own profession. His nonsensical definition of a 'madman' (the derogatory label revealing Justin's real opinion of mental illness) as 'someone who arrives at a fancy-dress party dressed in the Emperor's new clothes', suggests Nowra's low opinion of social workers like Justin, who spend their days in meetings (p.7). Thus, the darker side of Nowra's comic play shows the plight of the

mentally ill in the 1970s, caught between the equally inappropriate extremes of frontal lobotomies and occupational therapy.

THEMES, IDEAS & VALUES

Loyalty (fidelity) and betrayal (infidelity)

Both the play and the opera explore ideas about loyalty. In Mozart's opera, loyalty is defined as 'constancy' (or women's sexual fidelity). The play-within-a-play makes connections between Dorabella and Fiordiligi's infidelity to their fiancés in *Così Fan Tutte*, and Lucy's infidelity to Lewis in *Così*. Through Lewis' condemnation of Lucy, Nowra demonstrates that, although modern society has become more sexually permissive, there are still eighteenth-century double standards operating which condone men's infidelities but condemn women's. It is clear that, in both the opera and the play, the male characters are also unfaithful. Mozart's gullible heroines are rather callously deceived by the other characters, including their fiancés; however, the loyalty of the two men (Guglielmo and Ferrando) who agree to the deception of their fiancées is not questioned. Yet, as Henry says, Guglielmo and Ferrando 'deserve' to be betrayed by the women (p.66).

In the play, Lucy redefines fidelity (in line with modern views about morality) by arguing that she only has sex with Nick, but she sleeps with Lewis (p.71). In contrast, Lewis defines fidelity as 'not having sex' with Julie (p.72), despite being attracted to her. He quotes a line from the opera which claims that women's constancy is 'like the Arabian phoenix. Everyone swears it exists, but no one has seen it' (p.71), thus revealing his hypocrisy and self-righteousness. It is Julie who articulates the play's message that women are 'flesh and blood' (p.33) just as men are, and she recognises that 'men want women to deceive them because it'll prove their worst thoughts about women' and allow them to feel 'righteous' (p.33). Lewis' attitude towards Lucy confirms the truth of Julie's observation.

Like the opera, the play raises questions about where loyalty is owed and under what circumstances. Henry, for example, defines betrayal as having improper allegiances. He embodies the values of many conservative Australians in the 1970s, for whom opposition to the Vietnam War equated with support for Communism, and a betrayal of those who'd fought in previous wars (p.47). Through Henry, Nowra suggests that unwavering loyalty to traditional values can blind people to the need for social and political change. Betrayal also relates to broken promises, and Nick feels betrayed when Lewis breaks his promise to help organise the moratorium (pp.40–1). Both Lucy and Nick consider Lewis' involvement in an opera about 'love and infidelity' a betrayal of artistic and political principles (p.41). As Lucy puts it, theatre needs to be 'meaningful and intelligent' and not simply an 'emotional indulgence for the privileged few' (p.70). Lucy's failure to recognise the relevance of *Così Fan Tutte* reveals her incompatibility with Lewis.

Similarly, Lewis feels betrayed by Nick when he and Lucy break their promise to help Lewis with the play (p.2). Nick further betrays Lewis' trust by having sex with Lucy, and justifies this by accusing Lewis of being 'conservative' and arguing that 'women shouldn't come between mates' (p.77). Despite the complications arising from these divided loyalties and multiple betrayals, we are strongly positioned to condemn Nick, who aptly embodies the theme of betrayal in the play and whose self-centred values are clearly contrasted with Lewis' more altruistic (unselfish) and idealistic ones.

Perhaps the clearest example of loyalty in the play is shown by Julie to her girlfriend, who has stood by her 'through thick and thin, mostly thin' (p.87). Julie knows where her loyalties belong. She tells Lewis about her relationship with her girlfriend: 'without her I would be dead' (p.87). This reinforces the play's ideas about the gravity of our moral and personal obligations.

Sanity (order) and insanity (chaos)

Nowra makes two key points about 'insanity'. First, there is often an arbitrary line drawn between sanity and insanity. Society sees particular kinds of 'difference' as threatening, and deals with its fears by stigmatising

(judgmentally labelling) the individual. Nowra creates characters who cross the boundaries between the so-called binary opposition (contrasting pair of ideas or positions) of sanity and insanity. He does this to highlight injustices and inconsistencies in the mental health system. Lewis metaphorically crosses this line: significantly, he is mistaken by Justin for one of the patients (p.2); he sides with the patients against Justin, agreeing that it was Cherry rather than Doug who started the fire (p.23); he steps into Doug's role in the opera (p.42); and he joins Roy in imitating the effects of shock treatment (p.60).

Just as Lewis symbolically 'becomes' one of the patients, some of the 'insane' characters also blur the boundaries: despite her addiction Julie is sane and rational, yet her parents are able to have her 'committed' (p.36); Ruth leaves the institution to become 'a time and motion expert' (p.89), where her obsessive-compulsive tendencies are an asset; and Zac's eccentricity later helps him to become a successful musician (p.89). Perhaps Zac echoes Mozart's eccentricity here, although Mozart's talent, unlike Zac's, was prodigious.

Nowra's second key point about insanity is that institutions cannot help people like Roy and Henry who are suffering from severe mental illnesses; Roy's mania continues unabated, and despite a brief respite from his stuttering incoherence, Henry dies soon after *Così*.

The play's key images – light and dark, fire and water – are significant in highlighting the play's thematic concerns. Light traditionally suggests hope and clarity and, significantly, the play's opening stage direction connects the arrival of Lewis with a suggestion of hope. 'It is ... pitch black inside the theatre. A heavy door opens, a chink of daylight enters' (p.1). Opposed to this is the chaos and confusion that erupts when the lights go out (p.65). However, chaos is sometimes liberating, as Julie and Lewis discover when they kiss '*passionately*' in the darkness (p.68). And while light is illuminating, too much light can be 'blinding', as shown in Zac's overwhelming 'vision' – culminating in his crazy idea to recreate a world removed from 'real things' (p.62). Zac's delusion of clarity parallels some of the misguided attempts by the medical

profession to restore order to society by creating a separate world for the mentally ill, and to bring greater harmony to their lives with drastic and bizarre treatments. Through this imagery, Nowra shows that chaos can be both frightening and liberating, and control can sometimes be repressive.

The apocalyptic biblical images of fire and water are also highly symbolic in the play. Fire imagery dominates Act One, with the theatre nearly destroyed and the project almost abandoned. In using this imagery, Nowra alerts us to the way that theatre itself can be considered destructive or threatening (even anarchic) by confronting audiences and challenging society's values; this is precisely what *Così* aims to do. When Doug is removed, the fire imagery of Act One is replaced by water imagery in Act Two, with the cleansing rain constantly dripping through a hole in the roof (p.57). It soaks the posters (p.62), fuses the lights (p.65) and fills buckets (p.66). The water, despite its excessiveness, is ultimately regenerative; it symbolises the capacity of theatre to create a world 'as far removed from this depressing asylum [of the everyday world] as possible' (p.63), where 'harmony' can exist and optimism is possible ... albeit fleetingly.

Illusion (art) and reality (life)

Ruth's seemingly absurd need to clarify the difference between illusion and reality highlights the difficulty of actually being able to prove which is which. The difference between real coffee and imaginary coffee (p.10) is utterly unimportant to theatre audiences, who can accept theatrical illusion as a temporary reality, unlike Ruth, who 'can handle something being an illusion or real but not at the same time' (p.26). Ruth's difficulty points to the larger metaphysical (to do with abstract philosophical reasoning) issues raised by the play. For example, we can never be absolutely sure that our perceptions coincide with 'reality'. Thus, Ruth's inane questions (pp.26–9) highlight the unreliability of our own perceptions of the physical world, and raise larger questions about how clear-cut the distinction between reality and illusion actually is.

Theatre has always created illusions and depended on the readiness of audiences to willingly suspend their disbelief, accepting (for a while) appearance as reality. In *Così*, Nowra wants to prevent the audience from doing this by creating characters in a play, acting as characters in an opera – thus drawing our attention very explicitly to the idea of performance. This forces us to distance ourselves from the ‘people’ on stage and concentrate on the social and political issues embodied in the *characters*. By blurring the boundary between reality and illusion, Nowra makes an important connection between art and life.

This connection is also made through the play’s setting: the ‘burnt out theatre’ (p.1). This setting serves as a metaphor for a real world torn apart by the chaos of war and implies not only that theatre has a political role in the real world, but also that it’s potentially as powerful as a moratorium in voicing an opposition to war. The merging of real and illusory worlds thus draws strong parallels between art and life, and highlights the importance of art in our lives.

DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS

Essay topics are carefully designed to allow for different interpretations of the text. The topic will make an assertion that you might or might not agree with, or might partly agree with. Consider the following topic:

‘The comic irony of Nowra’s play is that the patients in the asylum are saner than the “normal” characters.’ Discuss.

At first glance, this seems to be a valid interpretation of the play, and it’s possible to discuss characters such as Henry, Julie and even Ruth as examples of relatively sane individuals in that they do have moments of clarity and insight. They can be contrasted with Justin and even with Lewis, whose behaviour is at times irrational or bizarre. There is some textual evidence to support this reading, which can be further validated by the ‘madness’ of the Vietnam War which has gripped the ‘normal’ world outside the asylum.

A different interpretation (and perhaps a more thoughtful one) might argue that, while some 'insane' characters are relatively normal, there are others, such as Cherry, Doug and Roy, who are not, and who pose a danger to themselves or others.

Perceptive students might also want to question the interpretation of irony as 'comic', arguing that while the play has comic elements, the blurring of boundaries between insanity and normality is as tragic as it is comic. There is certainly room for this interpretation, given Nowra's condemnation of the mental health system in the 1970s.

A further topic for consideration:

'The characters in Mozart's opera and Nowra's play prove the truth of the opera's title: "women are like that".' Discuss.

Mozart's heroines' inconstancy and Lucy's infidelity clearly support this interpretation; however, a differing interpretation would also consider the behaviour of Mozart's male characters and also of Nick and Lewis. It can be argued that the male characters are equally unreliable and that the sexual double standards operating in the opera and the play discriminate against the female characters and reinforce gender stereotypes that label women as weak or gullible.

Finally, consider the possibilities for differing interpretations in this topic:

"Lewis: They're mad. It's madness ..."

'The humour in *Così* comes mainly from Nowra's mockery of the mentally ill.' Do you agree?

This is a topic with which you are *meant* to disagree. Firstly, there are many sources of humour in the play, and your response should acknowledge some of them. Secondly and, more importantly, you should query the assertion that Nowra 'mocks' the mentally ill. A dictionary will be helpful in alerting you to the *contempt* and *disdain* connoted by the word 'mockery'. Your interpretation of the play must demonstrate an awareness of Nowra's attitude to mental illness – shown through the characterisation of Lewis, who is sympathetic towards

the inmates. Could you confidently support, with appropriate textual evidence, an interpretation which involves Nowra's *mockery* of the mentally ill?

Differing interpretations arise from a careful reading of the topic, a clear understanding of all the words (and their connotations) and the confidence to challenge some of the topic assertions. You can do this if you know the play well enough to provide appropriate evidence to support your interpretation.

ESSAY TOPICS

1. 'Lucy: We used to talk about important things ... now all you can talk about is reactionary drivel like *Così Fan Tutte*.'
How does *Così* show modern audiences the contemporary relevance of Mozart's eighteenth-century comic opera?
2. How are ideas about betrayal and loyalty explored through the structure of the play-within-a-play?
3. 'The comic irony of Nowra's play is that the patients in the asylum are saner than the "normal" characters.' Discuss.
4. 'The visual and musical elements in *Così* are as important as the dialogue in conveying the play's central ideas.' Discuss.
5. Nowra's play is set in a 'burnt out theatre'. Discuss the importance of setting and imagery in conveying Nowra's ideas in *Così*.
6. 'The characters in Mozart's opera and Nowra's play prove the truth of the opera's title: "women are like that".' Discuss.
7. 'Both *Così Fan Tutte* and *Così* are trivial comedies which ignore the important social and political issues of their times.' Do you agree?
8. 'Justin: The most important thing is to feel you are in control.'
Does *Così* suggest that illusions are more powerful than reality?
9. 'Roy: The music of this opera keeps the world in harmony.'
Why does Mozart's opera become so important to the characters in *Così*?

10. 'Lewis: They're mad. It's madness ...'

'The humour in *Così* comes mainly from Nowra's mockery of the mentally ill.' Do you agree?

Analysing a sample topic

'Roy: The music of this opera keeps the world in harmony.' Why does Mozart's opera become so important to the characters in *Così*?

As with all topics, it is vitally important to ask questions, not simply to agree.

- Does *Così Fan Tutte* become 'important' to the characters?
- In what ways? (In the same way for everyone?)
- Is it equally important to *all* the characters? (Which ones? Why?)
- How does Nowra show *Così Fan Tutte*'s importance, or lack of? (Consider some of the text's features and structures, such as symbolism and stage directions, as well as drawing on the dialogue.)
- What does Nowra want to show us through his characters' attitudes to the opera? Is the opera – and by implication, the theatre – important to him? Why? Are the characters who think it's important the ones we're meant to admire or sympathise with?
- Is it necessary to use the quote? Yes: you should show an awareness of its relevance to this topic somewhere in your response.

The answers to these questions will provide you with your assertion in response to the topic, and give you material for an introduction. You will also have sufficient material to develop a point of view about the topic.

Don't forget to ask yourself, '*How* does Nowra show us these things?' This will remind you to include some of the text's dramatic techniques and literary features. Here's an example of an introduction for an essay on this topic:

Mozart's comic opera *Così Fan Tutte* becomes very important to the patients of the mental asylum, and also to Lewis, the initially unwilling director. For Roy, it has always been important because of his passion for Mozart but, gradually, it provides the other patients with some 'harmony' in their lives and makes Lewis aware of the importance of love and respect. For other characters, however, such as Lucy and Nick, the opera is a waste of time better spent on serious political issues.

Significantly, the characters who think that the opera is important are also those who understand the value of loyalty, while those who regard it as trivial nonsense are self-seeking and disloyal. Through the opera's questions about loyalty, the play exposes and condemns disloyalty and self-interest and challenges the audience to critically examine their own values.

When you've worked out your introduction, write a plan. This should include topic sentences for your body paragraphs, and the textual details you'll use to illustrate your assertions and ideas about the topic. Here are some examples of topic sentences:

- At the beginning of the play, the opera is only important to Roy, whose manic enthusiasm gradually conquers all resistance.
- The opera becomes increasingly important to the other characters because it provides them with meaning and structure in their lives.
- The opera is also seen by some characters as 'bourgeois' and 'reactionary drivel'.
- Despite some opposition, *Così Fan Tutte* becomes increasingly relevant to the characters because it provides them with an opportunity to overcome their insecurities and limitations.

Your conclusion should reconnect with your main assertion about the topic, and show your understanding of the writer's views and values. Here is an example:

Nowra has used the structure of the play-within-a-play to show that Mozart's opera is still relevant to people today. The

questions raised about loyalty, love and the need for 'harmony' are important ones that still need to be thoughtfully considered. By raising these questions in a play set in a mental asylum in the politically volatile 1970s, Nowra reminds the audience of the values that should always be important in people's lives, and can help to bring harmony to a troubled world.

THE TEXT

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FURTHER READING

Cuddon, J. A. 1999, *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 4th edn, Penguin, London.

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Coleborne, Catharine 2008, *Mental Health*, School of Historical Studies, The University of Melbourne, www.emelbourne.net.au/biogs/EM00960b.htm

Films

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest 1975, dir. Milos Forman, Fantasy Films. Starring Jack Nicholson.

YouTube resources

Little Richard, 'Tutti Frutti', with a link to 'Good Golly Miss Molly': www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVWm9QeYtE

Mozart, *Così Fan Tutte*, Act Two, Scene Thirteen, finale: www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmbmVNHh0xA

The Electric Prunes, 'I Had Too Much to Dream Last Night': www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHo04epNQul

Wagner, 'Ride of the Valkyries' in *Apocalypse Now*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gz3Cc7wlfkl